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Commentary on Schwed

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Commentary on Menashe Schwed: "Visual Objects as Part of a Rational Communication Process"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Trained in rhetoric and composition, specifically the teaching of writing, I am at OSSA because I am fascinated by the relationships between argumentation theory and composition pedagogy—there really are such relationships, believe it or not. Thus, I admit at the outset that I am relatively new to Grice. While Grice's work on implicatures would certainly seem relevant to contemporary rhetorical theory and even composition pedagogy, Grice's scholarship seems to be yet another area where rhetoricians and philosophers seem to work too far apart.

Nevertheless, I hope to offer Professor Schwed both useful and effective commentary on his fascinating paper. I would like to ask several questions, considering both related and tangential areas that may have bearing on Professor Schwed's arguments about visual objects and their place in the rational communication process. I have long been interested in a broad understanding of "argument," so I am grateful to be asked to comment on a paper that seeks to extend our understandings of argumentation theory and the place of visual objects therein.

2. QUESTION: WHAT ABOUT INTENT?

When Schwed summarizes Grice's Cooperative Principle, that "communication is a cooperative enterprise" (3), Grice certainly seems to emphasize conversations (and conversations as "purpose-driven" speech acts). Further, the meanings of these conversations seem to rely a great deal on context. Applying this maxim to the visual realm, Schwed writes, "a Gricean approach will hold that what a visual object 'means' derives from what the creator means by uttering it" (3). Quoting Grice, Schwed continues, "what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion … may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign" (3).

Thus, my first set of questions: When a sign—in this case, an image—is removed from its original context (since context seems quite important in relation to determining meaning or, more precisely, *intended* meaning) how does Schwed's argument deal with this change? And should Schwed's argument attempt to deal with this in the first place?

A brief example: Consider prehistoric cave paintings such as the ones found in Lascaux, France. First, assuming these visual objects can be understood as arguments—

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and I'm inclined to believe they can be—what precisely might they mean in Gricean terms? We do not seem to have access to what the creators meant when they "uttered" (or, in this case, painted) these objects, so how do we go about determining their meaning(s)? When thousands of years go by and cultures change quite dramatically, context obviously changes quite dramatically as well. Perhaps the paintings are merely decorations, or are intended to have some positive effects on an upcoming hunt, or are representations of religious beliefs. Or are a combination of all these things and more. But when we have little or no access to the creator's intent vis-à-vis the original context, what happens to implicatures and meanings?

3. QUESTIONS: CREATOR'S INTENT AND AUDIENCE'S INTERPRETATIONS

My point about intent and its relationship to meaning leads me to my next, and I hope, larger and more important questions—first, one about the arguer's or creator's intent and the audience's various interpretations; second, one about a concept and approach from literary theory.

First, does Schwed (and Grice, by extension) place too much emphasis on the creator's intent and deny the audience's power/ability? Schwed writes, for instance, in relation to the creator of a visual object and the implicatures of said creation, "The question is, therefore, how a viewer will be able to figure out the creator's intentions via his utterance" (2).

Thus, does a visual object—a Magritte painting, for instance—"mean" only what the creator intends it to mean? "What a creator means or implies is determined by what he intends," Schwed explains further (2). In literary theory, the phrase "intentional fallacy" refers to "the so-called error of judging the meaning and success of a literary work in terms of the author's expressed purpose in writing it" (Shaw 1972, p. 148). Intentional, here, "refers to the intention of the writer" (Shaw 1972, p. 148). Schwed's analysis of the Magritte painting and his points about visual objects may seem far from literary theory, but this leads me to another question: How far apart are these areas? Is "intentional fallacy" in literary theory at all relevant to Schwed's points?

Also, what about the potential relevance of works by literary theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt, who argues for the "transactional theory" of literature, also known as reader-response criticism. In this approach, "the 'meaning' of a work is not merely something put into the work by the writer; rather, the 'meaning' is an interpretation created or constructed or produced by the reader as well as the writer" (Barnet 1997, p. 1408). Reader-response criticism does not hold that "anything goes" as far as interpretations a text are concerned. Arguing that *Hamlet* is a comedy instead of a tragedy, for instance, and that the pile of corpses at the end of the play is funny instead of sad or tragic, would certainly seem outside the range of useful or reasonable readings of the play's "meanings." But reader-response criticism does hold that the author's/creator's intent or the author's/creator's intended meanings are not necessarily the only meanings or the "right" meanings.

Perhaps Schwed implicitly recognizes this when he writes, while commenting on the rationality of visual objects, "the beauty one can find in a symbolic system is its openness and the creativity in producing interpretations" (9). He continues, "The inferences involved in recovering implicatures are in most cases *ab*ductive, and to a

lesser degree just inductive" (9). He notes, after briefly summarizing Pierce, that some of the issues raised at the end are "beyond the scope of this paper" (10), but I would encourage Professor Schwed to return to these interesting arguments elsewhere.

4. CONCLUSION: ONE LAST QUESTION

In conclusion, as I read Professor Schwed's arguments about implicatures and his analysis of Magritte's painting, I felt encouraged and enlightened. It is exciting to see a scholar propose the incorporation of texts outside the typical or usual realm into argumentation theory. That is, it is exciting to see one argue that our understandings of rational communication processes should extend beyond our usual understandings of what constitutes an argument and/or a text. I agree with Schwed, for instance, that "the significance of certain visual objects can be explained by principles that explain important features of linguistic meaning" (1). I wonder, however, why Professor Schwed's arguments focused primarily or only on Magritte's "The Treachery of Images."

Schwed makes it clear throughout his essay that "the significance of *certain* visual objects can be explained by principles that explain important features of linguistic meaning" (emphasis added, 1), but is the Magritte painting an anomaly when it comes to Gricean implicatures, meanings, and visual objects? Magritte certainly seems to instruct us in how to interpret, decode, or unpack his intended meaning(s), his implicature(s). In addition to the image of the pipe, he includes, as Schwed notes (4), the line "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*." Schwed comments, "Whatever is the full interpretation of this enigmatic painting, its meaning lays in the play between its explicit meaning and implied significance" (4). How might Schwed's Gricean reading of Magritte apply to other art forms and/or other visual objects? I wonder, for instance, about the relevance of various M.C. Escher images, which seemed to appear as I read Schwed's work (as Hamlet would say), "in my mind's eye." In relation to Escher's well-known "Drawing Hands"—the image of two hands concurrently drawing one another—do Grice's arguments about implicatures apply, for instance? Or do Gricean implicatures manifest themselves only in those visual objects where we also have written statements by the creator, statements such as "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*"? Is Magritte's visual object, in Schwed's term, "exceptional" (10), or could the analytical method apply to a more diverse variety of visual objects? I hope so.

link to paper

REFERENCES

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